

FANTASIES AT THE CROSSROADS

Neil Slaven checks out the new Robert Johnson biography 'Up Jumped The Devil' by Bruce Conforth & Gayle Dean Wardlow



Label shots from the B&R Archive.

Before anything else, this is a handsome book to hold in your hands. I've written before about the anticipation instilled by a well-presented volume, and this is one of the best. Printed on choice (but unnamed) paper, printed in America for once and not in China.

Johnson's face dominates the cover, unlit cigarette drooping from his mouth, his mismatched eyes almost glowering at you. I hadn't previously realised the intelligence they contain. His trained brain is one of the first revelations you discover in the manuscript's early pages. By then, a welter of fresh intelligence has already been presented, names named, locations pinpointed. It's surely the 'real life' of the book's subtitle.

The effect of reading these early pages is staggering, in the sense of being astonished. The revelations begin with the very first chapter, 'Robert Johnson Is In Town'. It's the summer of 1936 and he's at the Martinsville train depot to advertise his performance that night at O'Malley's, a jook joint just north of Hazlehurst's city limits. But his arrival has been anticipated; fathers are locking their daughters indoors while they go off to get drunk to Johnson's music. He's already got one local girl, Virgie Jane Smith, pregnant. Their son, Claud Johnson, born on 12th December 1931, would live to inherit what Steve LaVere didn't (or couldn't) keep.

Some idea of his itinerancy is given and also that Johnson used Friars Point as a hub for his restless travelling, using Hirsberg's general store as a daytime gig.

Elizabeth Moore ran a jook in the town with her husband Willie, who seconded Johnson and the elusive Willie Brown, erstwhile accompanist of Son House. Elizabeth knew Robert well enough to be a major source of information and opinion.

The next chapter provides the background for Johnson's birth, relating the histories of Charles C. Dodds and Julia Majors, both of whom were officially designated mulattoes, making them a couple of degrees better and more privileged than Negroes. They were married in Hazlehurst on 2nd February 1889. Copies of the relevant marriage licence and the census form for 1900 are reproduced. Dodds bought some land but got into debt and lost it to one Joseph Marchetti. It was rumoured he and Dodds shared a mistress and the rumour factory was so effective Dodds had to flee a potential lynching.

He settled in Memphis and changed his name to (R.L.) Spencer. His wife Julia, who'd had three children with Dodds, was made homeless and in 1910 moved in with Noah Johnson on the Mangold plantation outside Hazlehurst. There, in what was called a saddlebag house, Robert Johnson was born on 8th May 1911. Noah got tired enough of having so many children around the two-roomed house that once again Julia and her brood had to leave. After more desperate adventures and careless men, she made her way to Memphis to join 'Spencer' and his new wife at 898 Court Avenue. But her stay was brief and she set off again, leaving two-year-old Robert with what he came to regard as his family.

Around 1916, Robert went to school with his sister Carrie at the Carnes Avenue Colored School. There he learned to read and write, the first inkling of why his music was so tightly and intellectually constructed. He was malnourished in his infancy and this was the probable cause of his lazy eye or transient cataracts that were a symptom of low birthweight. Sometime in 1919 Julia came to Memphis to take Robert back to Horseshoe Lake in Arkansas, where she'd married sharecropper Will 'Dusty' Willis. He didn't take well to this uprooting. The only up-side was his introduction to what was called 'cotton-field blues'.

Robert abjured the cotton-field life, planting seeds, chopping cotton, dumping cotton bolls in a six-foot sack. Around 1920, the family moved across the Mississippi to the Abbey and Leatherman plantation in Commerce. This gave Robert the opportunity to continue his education at the Indian Creek School during the lay-off between December and the spring. He was already better-educated than his schoolmates. Back in Memphis he'd kept a notebook of ideas and lyrics and now he was able to add to it.

He was regularly beaten by Willis for his reluctance to work in the fields and now he was old enough to return to his 'family' in Memphis, which he did with increasing regularity, sometimes staying away for months. Then Julia told him that Noah Johnson, his true father, was living in Hazlehurst and Elizabeth Moore remembered Robert called himself both Spencer and Johnson, as well as having a nickname of 'Sax'. It seems that by the age of seventeen he was already playing guitar in public, having started on a diddley-bow. (The disparaging comments attributed to Son House, so frequently quoted, are put in a different perspective.) He also played harmonica and a bit of piano.

Sister Carrie moved to nearby Robinsonville and would be a help to her half-brother for the rest of his life. Another incomer to the town was Willie Brown, erstwhile partner of Charley Patton and Son House. Robert saw as many of their gigs as he could. As Elizabeth Moore put it, '(Robert) could talk about (Brown) because he played with him.' He also spent nights playing with Willie Moore and Willie Brown's friend Ernest 'Whiskey Red' Brown. He was fortunate in that he had an eidetic mind; any song he heard, either live or on the radio, he could play. Thus he was popular at frolics and parties for being able to respond to peoples' requests. He also became a compulsive drinker.

Now this is a tantalising and rather tragic fact. On one of his visits to Memphis, Robert made a five-dollar vanity record to play to his friends. He would play it to people and they'd compliment him on it, which was all the encouragement he needed. Whatever became of it? Is it waiting somewhere for John Tefteller to find it? And would it be playable?

He didn't know that his life was to become truly tragic. Close to Robinsonville were the communities of Clack and Penton. At the Clack grocery store he met the girl he would marry, Virginia Travis, fourteen years old, beautiful and sweet. They were married by the Reverend W.H. Hurley on Sunday, 17th February 1929. Both their marriage licence and Certificate of Marriage appear on page 78.

Playing The Devil's Music

Before year-end Virginia became pregnant. She went to her grandmother's to have the baby; in her absence Robert went back on the road. Virginia died in childbirth early in the morning of 10th April 1930.

It was several weeks before Robert came home to discover he had neither wife nor baby and his wife's relatives blamed him for being absent, playing the 'Devil's music', when she died. Robert was devastated. He renounced God and religion in drunken rages that would clear any room he was in. But music was his saviour. Son House and Willie Brown were playing at Oil Mill Quarters in Robinsonville and Robert would go to watch them. When House supposedly told his 'story' of Robert's ineptness in later years he helped to stoke the greater fallacy that Johnson found his skill at the crossroads. It was the first fantasy. As his stepson, Robert Lockwood stated: "Ain't nothin' at the crossroads but the crossroads." Here I must repeat the much-missed Keith Briggs' theory that Robert

Johnson and Tommy Johnson went to the same crossroads on the same night and each thought the other was the Devil. Wherever you are Keith, thanks for that.

Just south of Hazlehurst was the community of Its. The general store doubled as a jook and passing by, Robert heard Ike Zimmerman, a worker on a local road crew, playing better guitar than he was capable of. He was also a generous man, inviting Robert to live with his family. Ike's daughter Loretha remembered: "He was just like a family member ... for a long time, look like one of the family be there with us, and he just fitted in ... and they was going at that guitar ... it sounded just so good, just like they was competing."

Zimmerman liked to play blues in a cemetery at night, so that's where Robert got his instruction, in a graveyard in Beauregard. They weren't entertaining the haints (the restless spirits of the dead), Zimmerman went there for the quiet and lack of disturbance. As Robert's technique improved, the pair would set off on Ike's regular route. "They used to go everywhere in those little towns," Loretha recalled. "And they did a lot of walking."

Back in Hazlehurst, Robert took a shine to sixteen-year-old Virgie Jane Smith. She and Eula Mae Williams would stand outside Robert's gigs, especially Carrie Craft's Martinsville jook. Virgie Jane was attracted to Robert and they became an item. In the spring of 1931 they met Eula Mae and her boyfriend. Virgie confessed: "We're gonna play around tonight." Both couples played the two-backed beast and Robert and Virgie continued their affair for several weeks, until Virgie admitted to Eula Mae that she was pregnant. Robert was willing to marry her but she decided otherwise.

Robert's reaction was to marry Carrie Craft, who was significantly older than he was and already had three children. The civil ceremony took place on 4th May 1931 and the couple set off for Vicksburg and then Clarksdale. Their relationship foundered and Robert abandoned her to her eventual death in 1933. He returned to Robinsonville with Ike Zimmerman, determined to show Son House and Willie Brown the musician he had become. The venue was a jook in Banks, east of the city. After some badinage with House, Robert sat down and played. "When he finished, all our mouths were standing open," House admitted in 1964. House said: "Well, ain't that fast! He's gone now!"

Son House Never Mentioned The Crossroads

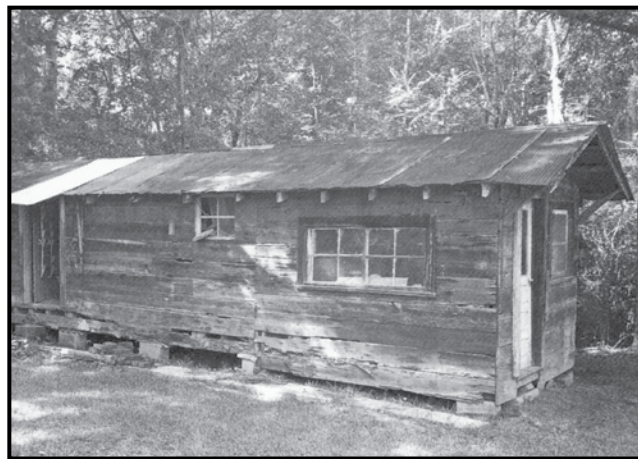
House never mentioned the crossroads at the time, but others did. Hoodoo was an active force in most people's minds, including Robert's, and a meeting with the Devil was their only explanation for his startling improvement. It didn't help that artists such as Clara Smith had released 'Done Sold My Soul To The Devil' in 1924, while Bessie Smith, Funny Paper Smith and Peg Leg Howell, amongst others, had made similar admissions in their records. Although he was aware of these common beliefs, it's doubtful that Robert put much credence in them – but he was perfectly capable of writing songs about them.

Robert moved to Hattiesburg and took the train north to Jackson, where he met Johnnie Temple. It's been assumed that Temple taught Robert the boogie bass patterns adapted from a pianist's left hand rhythm. But it was the other way around: "I learned that from R.L. in '32 or '33. I was the first person to carry that stompin' bass to Chicago." Temple showed him the open E minor tuning, learnt from Skip James, that Robert used for 'Hellhound On My Trail'. Early in 1934 he began using Helena, Arkansas as a home base, playing regularly at the Hole In The Wall and the many clubs and jooks around the town, with Wash Hamp playing second guitar.

In Helena he met Estella Coleman, mother of Robert Lockwood. The latter said: "Robert followed (my mother) home and she couldn't get rid of him." It seems he doted on her and didn't treat her with his usual indifference. She'd been married three times, two of them being to lodgers Milton Staines and Joe Coleman. Apparently young Lockwood wasn't interested in the guitar until Johnson arrived. "I really never did have a desire to play the guitar until Robert Johnson came along." What intrigued him was that Robert could play simultaneous melody and rhythm. "When I seen him doin' it, I decided that's what I wanted to do."

By now, Robert's one obsession was to make a record. That desire took him to Speir's Music Store in Jackson and an audition, after which Speir made a test recording of 'Kind Hearted Woman'. Robert also paid five dollars for another personal record, title unknown, a one-sided aluminium disc that eventually wore out. Speir contacted Ernie Oertle in New Orleans, told him about Robert and gave him Robert's family address in Memphis. In due time, news arrived that Robert had a chance to record in San Antonio. In preparation, Robert went to Memphis and wearing Carrie's son Louis Jr.'s suit, he had his photograph taken by Hooks Brothers.

Oertle and his wife Marie picked Robert up in Memphis and set off south-west on a three-day journey that was potentially fraught with danger. Robert's first session was recorded on 23rd November 1936. Vocalion 03416, 'Kind Hearted Woman' and 'Terraplane Blues', was issued early in January 1937. Further singles from the San Antonio sessions the two June days in Dallas were issued in February, March, April, June, August, September and November. Robert must have thought his future was bright.



Probable birthplace of Robert Johnson. The house (which is still standing), is what was commonly called a 'saddlebag house' - one room on each side of the entry way. Courtesy Bruce Conforth.

Sadly, his moment passed, his records sales declined, and his life went back to normal, scuffling from jook to jook, drinking to excess, until the final senseless ending. Rice Miller's warning not to drink from an opened bottle may have been his invention for our willing ears but it was good advice if it had been given. It seems his killer didn't intend for him to die. The idea was for him to suffer discomfort for a couple of days but Robert's stomach ulcers added a fatal dimension to his suffering.

To read about that, my friends, you'll have to buy the book. The revelations continue to the end. What I've written above doesn't spoil the pleasure you'll derive from finding out exactly who Robert Johnson was. Nevertheless, there were times when I felt that the legend and the romance it fostered had still not been finally dispelled. So, after the staggering and the momentousness, what thoughts emerge? I get the impression that the main text was written by Bruce Conforth, with comprehensive use of Gayle Dean Wardlow's multitude of interviews conducted in the 1960s and 1990s. But an echo of the tone adopted by Wardlow in his 'Chasin' That Devil Music', informs the Introduction.

Almost twenty years ago I put together 'The R.L. Spencer Legacy', a compilation of the twelve Johnson records in their issued order, for the short-lived ZirconBleu label. In the notes (which were also published in *B&R*) I remonstrated with those who'd decided that Johnson wasn't as important as he'd been made out – initially by those very people. Two sentences will suffice: 'In the aftermath of the first vinyl release of his recordings in the early 1960s, it suited blues savants that much of Robert Johnson's biography was hearsay, the stuff of legend. It left them free to analyse his lyrics and concoct fanciful and melodramatic scenarios for the mind that created them.'

Although not necessarily the 'savants' I referred to then, the Introduction is primarily used to castigate the authors of various books about Johnson and his music. The first to be chastised is Samuel Charters, since 'he interpreted Robert's lyrics in a sensational manner'; Frank Driggs used 'erroneous information' in his notes for 'King Of The Delta Blues Singers'; Pete Welding 'added to Robert's myth' in his notes for the second Johnson album; writer of 'Listen To The Blues', Bruce Cook's analysis 'is preterit, romantic hyperbole (in English English, the word is 'preterite', a posh way of saying 'bygone')'; in 'Searching For Robert Johnson', Peter Guralnick helped the crossroads myth to become 'fact'. Tom Graves' 'Crossroads: The Life And Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson', with an encomium from LaVere on its cover, 'fell far short of LaVere's claim'. Meanwhile, Barry Lee Pearson, Bill McCulloch and Elijah Wald wrote 'stellar books'.

The Introduction ends with the authors patting themselves on the back for their fastidiousness in gathering every interview, census record, marriage licence, etc., and they are to be commended for their endeavour. However, they can't wholly escape from the miasma of one-upmanship their disparaging of their contemporaries provokes. In fact, owners of this splendid biography would do well to ignore the Introduction completely or only read it once they've finished the manuscript. If you have a scintilla of interest in Robert Johnson, you just must buy 'Up Jumped The Devil'. I know I'll read it again when leisure time permits. Is that enough recommendation for you?

Neil Slaven has been engrossed in: 'Up Jumped The Devil – The Real Life Of Robert Johnson' by Bruce Conforth And Gayle Dean Wardlow; Chicago Review Press; 326 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-64160-094-1; \$30.00; £22.94 U.K.

In the discussion of 'The Complete Recordings' box set issued by Columbia/Legacy in 1990, on page six of 'Up Jumped The Devil' there is an error which states that the set has sold "more than fifty million copies in the United States alone." Bruce Conforth has advised us: "This is a typo. The box set sold 500,000 in the first year. It has passed one million now. The figure is certainly higher due to it also being released in vinyl and several other CD versions. According to Larry Cohn, it has sold at least two million and maybe closer to three million copies" – Editor.